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# Introduction

This is a collection of articles posted on my blog over the course of about a year. The idea is to provide advice and tools for amateur and semi-pro photographers, who want to get into stock photography, specifically microstock.

The articles have not been edited or modified in any way, so if you sit down and read this as a book, you may find a few points repeated throughout. Take it as a sign that these are important points.

I hope you will find something inspiring and useful in these pages. If you love it, consider going to my blog, where you can subscribe to my posts and even donate whatever you think, this collection of articles might be worth.

Thank you and happy shooting,
Rasmus

You are welcome to contact me with questions, suggestions and comments. Send your thoughts to rasmus@theprint.dk.

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http://rasmusrasmussen.com/microstock-photographers-guide

# Stumbling into Photography

*My oldest still-active image on iStock Shot in 2002 in Copenhagen, Denmark.*

As I write these words, I am getting close to getting my "diamond canister" on iStockphoto. That is exciting news. It means that I have reached the ultimate goal there, which also happens to include the highest royalty pay-out, and sold more than 25.000 photographs. And not only that but, right next to my name, a small sparkling film-canister will appear for the world to see. But in the end, none of this is really why I will be drinking champagne on the day it actually happens. When I reach diamond, I will celebrate a journey that has taken me much further than I could have possibly imagined. A journey that completely changed my life many times over. A journey that started back in 2000, when I read an entry on a website about this new start-up. Mind you, this was back in the dot com days of glory, so in itself a new start-up was nothing interesting. The fact that the recommendation to check it out came from a Jeffrey Zeldman, who happened to publish my favorite site at the time, made me take a peek. The website was iStockphoto and the concept was unique: Photographers share photos with designers, and by uploading your own, you can download more. It was web 2.0 when the internet was still barely out of beta.

At the time, I was working on a series of mock-up web designs for a company that no longer exists, and the idea of getting stock photography this way intruiged and inspired me to want to give a little back. So I borrowed the brand new 1.3 megapixel camera from the office and went to work.

Skip ahead a couple of years. I am now working for another agency, taking pictures with my very own camera. Design work was beginning to bore me, especially the endless meetings, last minute changes, programming problems and salespeople who had promised more than we could deliver. In the meantime, I had stuck with iStockphoto, who had adjusted their business model with the times. This meant that photographers were getting a little cash, whenever someone downloaded their images. This was the first micropayment site, I had ever encountered, and it was born out of the enthusiasm of everyone involved – not some calculated profit scheme. Lucky for me, the agency I was slaving for finally shut down its web design department and I was let go. That was what finally made me switch away from IT and start from scratch on the path, that would lead me to where I am today; I enrolled in a photography class.

## Going Steady with iStockphoto

From there, everything seemed to take off. Prior to my first visit to iStock, I had little to no experince with photography. Once I got serious about learning the trade, iStock proved to be the perfect companion. For two years, I attended school full time, learning everything from darkroom technique to Photoshop mastering, working with natural light and in studios, shooting obejcts, landscapes and people alike. As I learned the basics of photography, my number of images sold began to rise faster. As my portfolio got better, I started culling out a lot of the earlier images, increasing the appeal of my work as a whole. I became active in the forums on the site, and learned a lot from other photographers and designers. It was interesting to learn more about what clients were looking for, how images were being used and simply getting to know like-minded people all over the world.

One day, as a complete surprise to me, I was asked to become an iStockphoto image inspector. It sounds easy enough: Look at images uploaded by the contributing photographers at iStockphoto, and check to see that the photos match the standards for technical quality, lighting and composition, set by iStock policy. But it is anything but easy. Mostly because that behind each image is a person, whose feelings can get hurt by a harsh rejection, yet, if everything is let in, there are no standards at all. It is a fine line to be sure, and as an inspector you never stop learning.

While inspecting, I have seen thousands of images, taken with all sorts of cameras from cheapie point and shoots to ultra high-end Hasselblads with digital backs. I know which cameras have what problems and some of the most common issues with various lenses. I can tell the difference between a digital shot and a scanned negative in a split second, and sometimes even tell you if an image is going to cut it as stock, just from looking at a thumbnail. Like anyone who does a lot of repetitive work, and trust me, looking at image after image, day after day is repetitive, I have developed an eye for little details on both sides of both camera and the iStockphoto agency. This knowledge is what I will be sharing over the course of my writing here, hoping to perhaps inspire others, give a few tips and pointers, and of course draw attention to my own photography.

## Doing It For The Love of Doing It

I have been extremely fortunate, even though I am by no means the best selling or most talented photographer, simply to be part of all of this. From the first picture, which I think was of a half-empty parking lot in dull, random lighting, to my moving across the planet and starting a life with another iStock photographer, this has been a magical ride. Yet, in spite of all the changes to my personal life, I think of myself as part of a new generation of photographers fostered by microstock agencies like iStock. We work side by side with hobbyists and amateurs (from birdwatchers to stay-at-home moms who sometimes end up turning professional themselves). A generation of photographers who work both together and in open competition, and whose images are constantly seen, judged and

bought by both clients and peers. It is fast and cheap and more fun than I had thought any work could ever be. We learn by doing, books and from each other, and we welcome anyone who wishes to join our ranks.

This is roughly the story of how I got into photography and fairly quickly turned it into a career. Most people will not take it that far, but might earn enough from selling microstock images to pay for their hobby, a new car or the alamony, and all from having fun. It takes dedication and work to get a working portfolio, so don't quit your dayjob quite yet, but by all means sign up and get into it. There's no telling where it might take you.

# The Microstock Photographer in You

If you're thinking about going into stock photography, you probably have a lot of questions. Am I good enough? What does it take to sell my photos? Will I be able to compete with the thousands of other photographers out there? The good news is that with microstock, there is room for you to learn as you go. Most succesful microstock photographers started out with other careers, drawn into stock by a mix of curiosity and wanting to play around with their new digital camera.

Traditional photographers work their way up slowly through the business. They have years of training, from color theory and darkroom technique to knowledge about directing models and such mind boggling things as copyright law. If that is who you are comparing yourself to, it's no wonder you have your doubts. However, the microstock community is much different from that of the traditional, professional photographers. In fact, many old-school pros frown upon the whole microstock idea. They say it's undermining their business, which I personally see as a huge compliment to all of us "semi-pros" out there. If they feel threatened, we must be doing something right. There are advantages of going the traditional route (knowing your color theory is not a bad idea), but it is certainly not the only route available, and becoming a microstock photographer means, that you can start doing commercial and earning work from day one.

*Before attending the iStockalypse in Seattle, I had never shot multiple, actual models ...*

Like I have already said, I had practically no experience with any kind of photography, when I first started uploading my images to iStockphoto, but I did it anyway, inspired by what I saw other photographers doing. By that, I don't mean that I started out copying others (copying others is a very bad idea, because it will give you a bad reputation and possibly a whole lot of other

problems), but I saw other people shoot things that made me think: I can take pictures at least as well some of these guys!

## If at First You Don't Succeed

There is a lot of trial and error involved, when you first start out, and a lot of my own first shots were not even half as good, as I had imagined they would be. Some of them got rejected when I tried submitting them to iStock, which I tought was extremely frustrating at the time. In the end however, it was from the rejections, I learned the most. Chessplayers say that you learn more from the games you lose, than the ones you win, and so it is with stock photography. The key is to remember that rejections are not personal. They are pointers to actual problems, some of which can be fixed with post-processing. Other times, you have to settle for learning from your mistake and avoid repeating it next time.

As an inspector, I have rejected thousands of images. It's not fun to do. I would love nothing better than to get only brilliant images, that I could approve without thinking twice. But like any business, iStockphoto has quality standards, which I must observe and go by, when looking at other people's pictures. Later on, I will go into more detail about some of the pitfalls and common mistakes, and give some tips on how to avoid them. In the meantime, I would suggest checking out the ever-growing library of articles on iStock. They are full of good advice.

## Who is Behind the Camera?

The iStock-photographers I know personally, have all sorts of professional backgrounds. Some were designers, originally coming to the site to purchase images. I know a couple of freelance journalists/copywriters, who tried shooting stock out of curiosity and found a new calling. My better half has a background in the printing industry and started shooting food, because she once plated a dish so nicely, her guests told her to photograph it before it was devoured. Now she is a full-time food photographer and stylist. Finally, I know an endless amount of hobby photographers, who got into stock because they saw it as a great way to play with their new gear and make it pay for itself.

Perhaps this diversity in background combined with genuine interest is the very reason, the microstock community is so strong. It is always easy to get critique, inspiration and help from fellow shooters. All over the world photographers have started meeting up and doing photosessions, using each other as models, assistants and partners. Some are signing up for classes together, or renting professional studios for a day and taking it all much further, than they could have done on their own.

iStockphoto supports this culture by organizing so-called iStockalypses. These are huge social events and workshops combined, complete with models, props and afterparties.

People network, learn and have tons of fun. It was at an iStockalypse in Seattle, that I met my better half, so naturally, I highly recommend these events.

The point of all this is, that the microstock world is very different from the traditional photography business. Not only in the way the business is conducted and the low prices per image, but also very much in the way the microstock world is a community. I have referred to the shooters as semi-professionals, which doesn't mean that the work is half-assed (in truth the available images are all over the place, but in some cases very much on par with the work of world class commercial photographers). The reference is in regard to the place in business these photographers have, right between the non-commercial hobbyists and the full-time pros. Indeed, some stock photographers are full-time as well, but most of us do it for fun and pocketmoney, and once you sell your first image, you'll discover just how addicting it can be. You will find yourself strangely excited about earning a quarter here and there, probably getting a few raised-eyebrow reactions from friends and family, as you babble on about the three bucks, you made yesterday. But trust me when I say that it does add up, and when you cash that first hundred dollar check, your friends will start asking how they too can sign up.

So, to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this post. Are you good enough? Well, if you pass the iStockphoto photographer's application, the answer is yes. You may not be Dave LaChapelle, but you don't have to be.

What does it take to sell? Tenacity and a willingness to learn. Don't get discouraged by rejections, but learn from them and keep uploading new images. Soon you will see your work improve, your ratio of approved versus rejected images will improve with it, and finally, so will your sales.

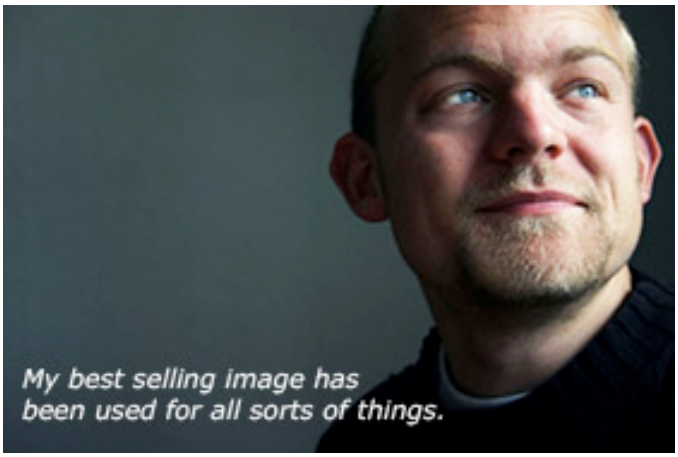
Will you be able to compete? The thing is, that it's not really a competition. The more photographers shooting good images, the more buyers will come looking for them. Instead of making a name for yourself on your own, your work will be part of an enormous collection, where your stuff is displayed side by side with everyone else's. My advice would be to focus solely on making your stuff as imaginative, useful and technically good as you possibly can, because as soon as your images appear in buyers's search results, there's no telling which shots will best fit what they're looking for.

# How Microstock is Used

A lot of the questions I hear from people who are new to stock photography, are in regards to how the images are used. Photographers want to know if the idea they had when they were doing a shoot, corresponds with what the designer saw. And of course, there is a certain amount of satisfaction, in seeing your work being put to use, and so another common question is about finding and seeing the work in action.

It used to be that almost all the buyers of microstock images were small design agencies, freelancers and part-time designers. The major agencies were still too used to shopping at the traditional stock houses, where images cost up to several hundred times the price on the microstock market. The argument would be, that the quality on the microstock sites was too low, because the pictures were primarily taken by amateurs. This attitude has changed over the past couple of years.

The people who were buying microstock images in the early days still represent the bulk of buyers, but more and more larger ad agencies and in-house designers for major media houses are finding their way to iStockphoto and similar agencies. And the reason is simple: Amateurs do not necessarily produce sub par work, and at a small percentage of the price you'd pay for traditional stock, it is worth looking through the microstock collections first. Add to that, that more and more professionals are adding their images to the microstock databases, heightening the overall quality of the collection.




**Finding Your Work**

Because of microstock being so cheap, designers often download more images than they need, often for making comps and sketches. Other times people download images for their own use, to print out and hang on a wall or to use as a desktop background. These are some of the reasons why it is fairly rare, that the photographer gets to see his image in use.

On iStockphoto, there is a section of the site called Designer Spotlight. This is a sort of gallery, where downloading members can show off their work in return for free credits, allowing them to download even more. At the same time, the Designer Spotlight has a rating feature, where designers get their work reviewed by their peers and photographers alike, and the top-rated ones are browsable by everyone. Every week, one design is chosen to be displayed on the front page, giving the designer some extra exposure. Whenever a design is put on display in the Designer Spotlight, any photographer whose work is part of that particular design, get an automatically generated notification.

However, Designer Spotlight is not the only way for photographers to find their work in use. On the iStock forums, there is a section called "In Action", where members of the community frequently post sightings of other people's images. It never ceases to amaze

me, how often other photographers actually recognize their fellow shooter's work, and though there is no automated notifications tied to the forums (unless you are already subscribing to a particular thread), it is here I have found most of my own shots put to use.

Finally, one way to find your own images in use, is simply to google your name or username. This will only lead to sites that actually credit their photographers, which is rare, but it does happen.

**Don't Take My Word For It**

I asked two designers from Designer Spotlight, whose designs were featured in the "Top Rated" section, if they would answer a few questions about their work and iStockphoto. Both were happy to do so – another testament to the kindness and helpfulness of the community members. Debora (olandesina) is a freelancer operating from The Netherlands and Andy (coolpink) is part of an agency from the UK.

First, I asked why they were using iStock in the first place. Debora tells me, she got an economics degree and went to work in marketing and through that stumbled onto iStockphoto. Seeing that she could submit her own photos as well as buy images for her work, she took an interest. Eventually, she was able to start up her own business, and she boils her final answer down to this: "So you ask why iStock? Because it made me quit my day job and pursue what I love most, graphic design and photography. When I found iStock I knew I had a passion for graphic design and photography but I didn't know how to combine the two things and make a living out of that."

Andy from Coolpink adds that the price and the sheer size of the image collection is an important factor. "I guess the main reasons are that it's fairly in-expensive and there is a huge range of imagery spanning a vast selection of catergories. I also use it to obtain vector artwork which i can then manipulate to suit my needs saving me from having to spend hours illustrating from scratch."

When asked what the images are typically used for, Debora said: "I have been using iStock images and files in all sort of projects. From marketing presentations to any kind of marketing material as posters, flyers, brochures, web banners and websites." Andy's answer was similar. "I mainly use iStock imagery for website concept work, as well as for imagery for final websites when the client is struggling to provide a particular shot. I've also used the imagery and illustrations for print work and even branding."

To give an example, Debora referred to a recent client of hers. "For a beauty salon I recently built a new website that integrates a flash menu navigation and lots of different images from iStock. I also worked on a series of posters for the same client. She was really happy with the images chosen for the website that we decided to reuse the same images for the posters. I downloaded the Large (high resolution) files as they were going to be printed in A2 format."

Another question was, how the designers found the right images for their projects. Andy said this was the tricky part, which is also the case for photographers, when they are trying to figure out how to successfully market their images. Andy adds: "Sometimes I search by concept (office and love), others I tend to be more specific (ie: man and and woman hugging in an office). I usually have a pretty rigid idea of the photographic stlye I want to use and the subject. I'll then hunt around for a few hours trying to find either the photographer's style which suits, and/or the image which contains the specific subject matter and refine the search around that."

Debora takes a step back before answering. "I find the right images in the first place by asking the right questions to the client, and then by searching for it." She goes on to mention how she has some photographers, she might turn to directly, because she is already familiar with their style. "I normally run a search on the complete collection but sometimes, when I am in a time squeeze, I already know which portfolios to search to find the right image for the job." More specifically, she describes the process like this: "I tend to sort the first results by downloads, to see what other designers downloaded based on the search terms. This also helps me to refine my search. Then I filter the results by Newest first and along the way I add the files […] to an ad hoc created lightbox."

I wondered how many of the downloaded shots are actually used in the finished designs. Andy puts a number on it. "I'd say around 60%-80% as an average. It always depends on the client." Debora agrees: "Mostly all of the images I download are used in my final design." She also adds that when it does happen, that an image doesn't make it to the final design, she still finds a use for the image, either in another project or the Steel Cage (where iStock designers battle each other for credit prizes). Also, she says, she finds it an added bonus to study the EXIF data of downloaded images, to learn more for her own photography. "It happened few times that I bought an image just because I found it great and couldn't resist the temptation to look at it closer, even if only for the pleasure of studying it and learning from it."

Finally, I wanted the designers to pass on a few tips for all the stock photographers out there. Debora starts out by saying: "I believe if you enjoy what you are doing the results will come." She embellishes this by stressing the importance of being selective in your uploads. "The other day I saw the portfolio of a guy that just covered all the possible position on a feet going to slide on a banana, from above, from below, from the side, of a man, of a woman, with black pants or with a skirt. It's just a waste of time and effort, in my opinion." Andy adds another angle on this "[Photographers] should pick a market, i.e 'Leisure Activities in the City' and fill that category with lots of great shots. Too often I struggle to find the right shot as the subject material hadn't been explored enough," and he finishes off with a practical tip, asking photographers not to crop their images, so that he may have more freedom when composing his designs.

It's not easy to predict how your images are going to be used. My own most sold image has appeared on everything from a billboard, advertising a small church in Texas, to

banner ads on eBay, advertising leather handbags. Nevertheless, it never hurts to aim at a specific theme and listen to the designers you talk to along your way.

# Picking the Right Camera

Before we begin, let me just point out that this is written with photographers in mind, who want to get into microstock photography or occasional work for hire. That said, let me be blunt about it: If you're serious about selling your photos, you should invest in a DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) camera and save the point and shoot (PNS) for snapshots. There are a number of reasons for this, which I will attempt to cover in the following, but if you don't want to read the whole thing, that was the most important point right there. Even if you only plan on doing this part-time, having the right equipment will make a huge difference in your own performance as well as your sales.

To get started, you should be able to get everything you need for $1,000 (US) or less.

The next question I hear is which camera to choose, what lenses and accessories to buy and so on. My personal standpoint is this: If you buy a Canon or Nikon DSLR, you will get a good camera – even if you buy the cheapest model. There are other good brands out there, and you may want to shop around a bit. I would, however, warn against any camera that upsamples the resolution automatically, simply because of the fact, that upsampled images go against the required standards on iStockphoto, and you may end up paying more for the camera, than it is actually worth (for more on this, see the article on upsampling over on iStockphoto). So unless you are willing to take my word for it and go with one of the two brands mentioned above, make sure you do your homework, before picking your most important tool.

Here is the top 5 reasons, why you should take the plunge and splurge on a DSLR camera.

**1. Image Quality** – Most PNS cameras shoot only in jpg format. And even at the largest resolution available, they tend to overcompress. This increases noise, discoloration and artifacts. Uncompressed formats may have the same problems, but less so, and you will have more leeway to edit and fix whatever problems might be there. I have seen some PNS cameras that offer uncompressed formats, but always at the cost of speed. It takes a lot longer to save an uncompressed file to the memory card. PNS cameras also often come with mediocre lenses, which cannot be upgraded and are likely to give you unwanted distortion or chromatic aberration, also known as 'purple fringing' - discolored lines along high contrast edges in your pictures.

**2. Speed** – Everyone who has ever owned a point and shoot knows, that there is a delay from when you click the button to when the picture is taken. This can be extremely frustrating and cost you a lot of missed shots. DSLRs will shoot instantly, the only delay being your chosen shutterspeed. This may sound like a detail, but it is in fact a major difference.

**3. Versatility** – On a DSLR, you can change your lenses, attach flashes or connect strobes, use wireless remotes and so on. A PNS camera is what it is. There are models out there that offer add-ons to the built in lens, but even with that, they can never compete with the versatility you will find with DSLR.

**4. Upgradability** – You may not be able to upgrade the chip in your DSLR, but if you buy a bigger resolution or newer model later on, you can still use all your lenses and other accessories, provided the new camera is the same brand as your old one. PNS cameras can only be used as hand-me-downs or garbage, when they become obsolete or break.

**5. Looks Matter** – Let's face it. If you want to work with models, make-up artists and maybe even do a little non-stock work for hire directly with clients, it looks a lot more professional to show up with a DSLR. After all, what would you think if at your wedding, the photographer dug out his little credit-card sized PNS? It sounds silly, I know, but the truth is that how we look, affects how others percieve us on other levels as well.

As you grow as a photographer, so will your requirements to the equipment you use. It is true that a good eye for composition and concept is more important than the camera, but wouldn't it suck to have all your masterpieces declined by the stock agency, because they had too much compression in them? With a DSLR camera, you have a lot more room to grow. You will not be as bound by the technical limits, as you would otherwise.

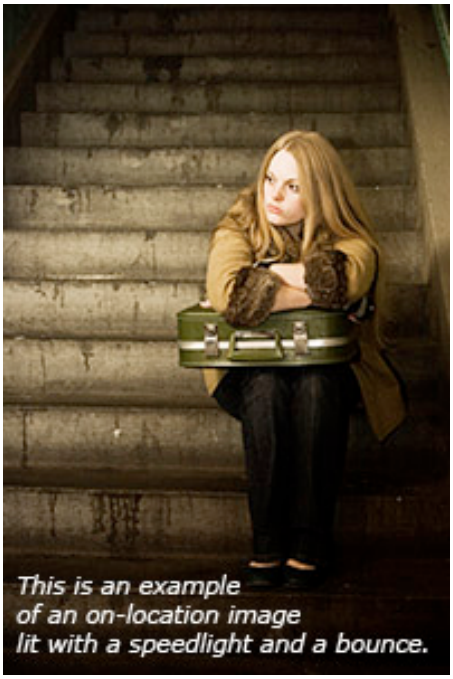
## Lenses and Lights

It is very easy to spend a fortune on accessories for your camera. Not only are there a ton of them, but they are also fairly expensive. For that reason, the best advice I can give a beginner is this: Be patient. Don't go out an buy all the L-glass lenses Canon has to offer, just because they supposedly are the best of the best. You will probably not need them, at least for a while.

First step is become familiar with the camera itself and learn the basics of post processing. For this, you don't need a top-of-the-line lens. If your camera came with a kit lens, I suggest you use that. In time, you will want to buy something better, but for starting out the kit lens is fine.

Another lens, I always recommend getting right off the bat, is the 50mm prime. Whether you shoot with a Canon, Nikon or one of the other major brands, the 50mm is a very cheap investment, and the image quality is usually fantastic.

The other reason why you shouldn't buy a whole lot of lenses right away, has to to with your preferred subject. If you like to shoot architecture, you will want a good wide-angle




lens, but for portraiture a slight tele would be preferable. If you shoot birds in far-away trees, you will need a really big tele, but if you prefer bugs, you will want a macro. And so on. Picking the right lens for the job is almost as important as picking the right camera, and when you know what kind of subject you prefer, you will be better prepared to make the right purchase.

My approach to buying lights is similar. Don't go out and buy a huge set of strobes before you know how to shoot with one light source. Lighting theory is too big a subject to cover in this post, but I would suggest getting yourself a good, medium-sized bounce for reflecting sunlight (excellent for natural light, where harsh shadows can easily ruin an otherwise great shot) and a speedlight flash for shooting indoors (bouncing a speedlight off a wall is infinitely better than any built-in on-camera flash). With these tools, you will have enough to keep you working for a long time. And the best part is, that even as you improve and expand your arsenal of lighting equipment, those first investments will not lose their value.

As with lenses, your lighting requirements will eventually depend on your niche. A lot of still-life photographers like to work with either natural light or hotlights. If you shoot fashion-style pictures, hotlights would be murder on your models, and you will want a good set of strobes instead. For location-work and most all-round situations, the speedlight and bounce combination is awesome.

## Keeping it RAW

On a final note, I always recommend shooting in RAW format. There are successful photographers out there who don't use it, but it does offer a lot of advantages over jpg. RAW files are like a digital negative. You can mess with it all you want, but the original information, the data you captured when you took the picture, will always be there. You can always go back to the original, if you want to try alternative processes or if you simply messed up in your editing. RAW also offers other advantages, such as white balance correction, contrast adjustment and even color toning and correction, all with no loss to the original capture. In many cases, you don't even need any further processing, if you have a good original and know how to use your RAW converter. iStock's article 'Shooting in he RAW' has a more in-depth description of RAW's advantages.

I have touched on many different things in this post, which was supposed to just be about picking the right camera. Image processing and lighting technique has been

mentioned in passing, but hopefully in a way that underlines my point: If you are serious about becoming a semi-pro (or full time) photographer, you need a DSLR.

# Get Your Props On

When you're first starting out as a microstock photographer, chances are that you will want to experiment with different styles and genres of photography. Whether you end up shooting models or still life, props and costumes can be a fun addition and help kick your inspiration into gear. As you find your niche, you will start thinking about establishing an actual collection. My better half, the very talented food photographer Kelly Cline, will share a couple of her thoughts on props in a bit.

### Play with What You've Got

To get started working with props, you don't have to go very far. Here is an exercise that I actually had Kelly put together for me one day, I felt a bit uninspired: She collected a small box of around 30 objects, and I had to work with what she gave me. The challenge was to shoot at least one photo with everything in the box. Some things could be combined into a still life, others worked better as isolated objects. The exercise forced me to think fast and creatively, and I ended up getting a few good shots as well as having a lot of fun. Not all of my photos were good enough for stock, but at least I completed the challenge.

Have a friend or significant other help you out or pick a random box from your attic and shoot what's in it. That exercise is also a great way to play around with lighting, by the way. Different objects look better in different light and with different backgrounds.

Costumes are another great prop, and you may already have a number of those laying around. That old waitress job you quit and kept the uniform from? As long as it's not plastered full of logos, it makes a great outfit for waitress pictures. Or what about that summer you got into scuba-diving and bought the whole outfit? Instead of letting it collect dust, put it on a friend and take some pictures against a blue background or even under water. Did you just buy a new pair of overalls and gardening gloves for working in the yard? Dress up and shoot it.

When I say costumes, what I am really referring to is specialised clothing. Day to day clothes are great for portraits, but since this is all about props, we will focus on outfits and uniforms, rather than jeans and a T-shirt.

## Investing and Organizing

Since I shoot mainly people, I often have to invest in props that go with a certain idea. For one shoot, I went out and bought everything needed for a police detective. From the trenchcoat to the gun (a replica, but it looks real in pictures). It took me a month of lurking around eBay and other websites, and a couple of trips to my local thrift store, before I had all the props I wanted. But it was fun, and the sales from the resulting pictures have more than paid for everything since then.

When buying props, I really take the time to look for good deals. Since you make only a little at a time, when you shoot microstock, I don't want to shell out a small fortune and have to wait six months just to cover my expenses. If I have to buy everything needed for a photo session, I try to keep the prop and costume budget under $100. Sometimes I can go a little over, but just keeping that number in mind, helps me not go overboard. Luckily, some props can be used over and over, which means I can make my tight budget stretch even further for every session.

My detective props are now stored in a nicely labeled shoebox, and trust me when I say that the whole labelling thing, as tedious as it may be, is a very, very good idea. As your collection grows, you will have a need for some kind of system. I know that some photographers meticulously catalog and number everything, but I am not that organized. A couple of stacks of labeled shoeboxes do just fine, but then again, I really don't have that huge a collection.

## Kelly Cline on Props

Kelly Cline is one of the most prolific photographers on iStockphoto, and I would not hesitate to call her one of the best food stylists and photographers in the world. Though I admit to being biased, her work does not need my word for it. Her portfolio is both varied and beautiful enough to make anyone hungry. Since food is a genre that requires props for every single image, I asked her a few questions about her collection.

*1. When did you start collecting props and how many would you say that you have?*

"Once I discovered that I wanted to do photography as a living, the next most important thing besides procurring a good camera was gathering props. So, sometime around 2003 I started collecting props, I currently have an uncountable amount. But if I were to guess, I would have to say in excess of 1500 items from hard hats to teaspoons."

*2. What are some of your favorite props and why are they so good?*

"Colored Paper. I know it sounds kind of lame, but you can change the entire mood of a shot with a little colored paper."

*3. Do you plan shoots around props you have or shop for props that fit your ideas?*

"I have such an abundance of props that often I can visualize what one item might look like in a certain setting, so I will shot what I have on hand already.

"There are other times though where I don't feel like I have the 'right' prop, for what I want the image to turn out like, so I search and scour to find it. I have had some props take me a couple years to locate. I am a stickler, it has to be right or not at all."

*4. How much research do you put into finding the right props?*

"A lot of research. If I am uncertain about a particular subject I am about to shoot, I try to educate myself. I have a thing about keeping the subject in context. I don't want to take a shot of a subject that you have to sit and decipher. You wouldn't put boxing gloves, an operator head-set, fly fishing boots and a business tie on a bikini clad model or put a grilled steak in a pie dish, right? It just wouldn't make any sense."

*5. What would you say to new photographers, who are about to start a prop collection?*

"Check with your spouse. Prop collecting can get out of hand. Make sure you have room for them, prepare your space with plastic bins to store the small stuff and shelving to store the larger items. Get it organized and try to keep it that way. It is so easy for it to become chaos when there is no organization.

"Choose your props wisely. Don't add props that are unnecessary to a shoot as it makes the shot less useful and cluttered with items unrelated to your subject. Props should draw attention to your subject and give it context and meaning, they should not make the viewer or buyer to sit and look at it with a giant question mark floating over their head."

# What is Good Stock Photography?

A good stock image is one that many designers will buy to use in their projects. It has versatility and longevity, and it features a subject that supports many different messages. That's the simplest way to put it, but making photos that fall into this category is not simple at all.

First of all, it is important to distinguish between a good photography and a good stock image. You've captured a pretty sunset that will always remind you of that trip to Hawaii, or a shot of your baby daughter eating her very first slice of melon, and those pictures

have a personal significance for you and your family. That's great, but it's not necessarily good stock.

One could argue that all commercial photography is about storytelling, but with stock there is another factor that plays in as well: usefulness. You will want images that are useful for illustrating many different stories, rather than just one. As a rule of thumb, snapshots are not very useful for this, though they may help jog your own memory down the line. There will be the occasional exception of course, but I see a lot of new stock photographers, who start out by uploading snapshots they've taken without having had buyers in mind when they clicked the button.

So, how do you avoid falling into this trap? Instead of uploading whatever is on your memory card, take the time to set up actual stock-shooting photosessions, like the excercise mentioned in the post about props. Focus on trying to come up with useful imagery that can support a designer's message.

In order to do this, you will need to train your mind to think in terms of looking for stories. The best thing you can do, is to take a look at a photo and ask yourself what stories this picture could tell. If it's one of your own shots, you may want to show it to someone else and ask them that same question. If you know any designers personally, sit down with them and go through some of your images together. You might find that your images are already more useful than you thought. Different people see different things in the same images.

Analyzing your work in this way, also helps when keywording your photos, which in turn will help more designers find the image thus generating more sales for you. Be careful though, that you don't try to squeeze meaning into an image that isn't really there. When you think you see a story in your photo, but you still have to explain it to others, chances are you're overanalyzing. You don't have to find every little hint of a message in your shots for them to be good or to sell well. It is better to focus on a single theme and build on that, than to try and cover everything, every time you shoot.

### You as an Art Director

Commercial photographers often work with art directors, who basically lay down the requirements of the shoot. The art director is in charge of the planning and overall feel of the final result, leaving the photographer free to focus on the actual execution. When it comes to shooting stock, you are doing both of these jobs. You cannot become a

succesful stock photographer, if you ignore the planning and preparation and just want to do the shooting. Simple as that.

First step is to seek out inspiration. Sit down with your favorite magazines and look at the ads there, looking for themes and stories in the photos you see. Buy some books with examples of commercial photography and study those. Oftentimes they will come with notes about the images and the shoots during which they were taken. Once you feel inspired, it's time to come up with a theme of your own.

I find it helpful to sit down with a notebook and do a little brainstorming. Even if the shoot I am going to do is a small one that doesn't require a lot of physical preparation, having a mental image of the result I want is a tremendous help. You can make your stock images more useful by keeping the themes a little on the general side, so I try not to be too specific at this point. At the top of my page, I will put down the theme I want to brainstorm. Let us say: Eveningtime at home

What are the first images that come to mind? A happy couple snuggling on the couch, watching a movie togehter? A family dinner? Perhaps a father and son playing a board game? There are too many possibilities for just one shoot. Time to narrow it down a bit.

Looking for something that would be fairly simple to set up, I decide that I am going to go with just one model – a young woman. So, what would a single, young woman be doing at home in the evening? She could be reading a book, calling a friend on the phone or enjoying a glass of red wine while chatting with some guy online. Maybe she has a cat or enjoys knitting. I think about the stereotypes and what other things that share this theme (time to watch Bridget Jones and take notes). All of the shots mentioned here are easy enough to do and can all be fit into a single session. Add to that a couple of headshots of her smiling at the camera, looking out the window or lighting a candle and you'll have at least 10-15 good, different and useful photos for your portfolio.

I actually haven't done this particular shoot, but just used it as an example. So feel free to kick your iStock portfolio off with it, and you can buy me a beer some day, if the shots take off and make you rich.

## Examples from my Own Work

Three themes I have shot in the past are "Relationship Trouble", "The Detective" and "Cozy Winter". The first of those involved two of my friends, who agreed to act the part of the troubled partners. The shoot was very small and impromptu and took only about half an hour to do. We did not add any costumes or special props but did everything based on the emotional theme. I tried to compose the shots in a way, so that the angles and depth would help the models along.

I have already mentioned the Detective shoot, and this was very much a theme that all came down to the props and location. It was the props that helped the model get into character and bleak parkinglots, dirty alleys and crowded streets added the ambience. We moved around from place to place and spent most of the day shooting.

Finally, for the Cozy Winter theme, I shot my better half against a plain white background, dressing her up in pink and white winter clothing already in her wardrobe and making her look all cozy and happy. Goofing around helped lighten the mood and brought out the genuine smiles I wanted.

Big or small sessions alike, the fact that there is at least some amount of planning makes all the difference. You certainly don't have to script everything out in advance, although I know some photographers who do and have long lists of specific poses and lighting setups down before ever picking up the camera, but at the very least, you need to have some general idea of what you want. From there, it's easy enough to do variations over the chosen theme whether through the use of props, locations, alternative angles (try standing on a chair and shoot from above) or whatever else you can think of.

If you look at my three themes presented here, you will see that each one has images that fall a little outside the original idea. The whole point of this post is to make you think about what you're shooting and encourage you to plan ahead. If you happen to shoot something that works during a session, though it may not fall into your original plan, go ahead an upload it anyway. The fact that you were in a stock frame of mind, will most likely take your picture out of the snapshot category anyway. When it all comes down to it, only your own imagination sets the limit.

# Two Types of Stock Imagery

Through the years I have noticed two general sub-genres of stock photography that both have a huge market. I call these ”The Clean Image” and ”The Dramatic Image” and in the following, I will take a closer look at these two types of photographs, when and how they work. Before we get to that though, let me point out that there are many images that fall outside of these definitions, that still sell very well, so you should read this as guidance rather rules set in stone. In other words, don't let my observations limit your creativity.

### The Clean Image

By clean, I mean that the image itself is fairly neutral and open-ended. The most obvious type of clean image is the object isolated on white background. This is a type of stock image that has been done to death many times over. By that, I don't mean that you should stay away from it altogether, but before you spend hours learning and

practicing your isolation skills, stop to think about the subject you are shooting. Not all things are well suited for this type of image. I have seen people isolating everything from doors and fountains to trees and boats, and only very rarely does this type of subject work. After giving it some thought, here is what I have boiled it down to: If your subject is normally percieved as part of a larger picture, it probably won't do too well as an isolated object. After all, what is a door without a doorway or a tree without a landscape? It's all about usefulness, as I have covered previously.

So, what does do well on a white background? Loads of things. Small objects from cellphones to ants, that designers could easily paste into the margin of a flyer or brochure, but also large objects and people. Even that boat from before might work, if it's done properly.

The thing about isolated subjects is, for it to look good without a background, it has to be lit evenly. If you took a picture of a boat in stark sunlight, it will have harsh shadows that will look very strange when the rest of the image is cut away. If you were to shoot it in a studio environment however, you could soften all the shadows and make sure the light floods the boat from all the right angles. As with any kind of photography, lighting is extremely important when shooting to isolate, and for that reason, I recommend you start out shooting smaller objects that require less space and are easier to light.

Other types of clean images include portraits shot against a simple background, landscapes where nothing out of the ordinary is going on (as in: no lightning storms or lemmings jumping off cliffs), cityscapes, architecture, macro shots, textures and other subjects that lend themselves well to text. Very often, when clean images are used by designers, it is actually the text that ends up giving the image meaning.

### The Dramatic Image

As you have probably guessed, this type of image is one that tells a story on its own. These may seem to have a lesser degree of usefulness, since the story told by the photo would limit the number of things you can relate to it. The truth is that dramatic images sell just as well as clean ones.

Among stock photographers, one favorite dramatic subject seems to be businesspeople doing business stuff. There are countless shots of guys in suits holding up blank businesscards, secretary-looking women with headsets and small groups of businesspeople huddled over a laptop. These images are extremely popular and sell well, but be prepared for fierce competition, if you decide to base you portfolio on

business shots only. Similar examples include health professionals, lab technicians, romantic couples and other shots of people interacting.

Shooting this type of image and creating good, useful stock that is also original can be extremely challenging. My advice would be to pay attention to the theme of each individual shoot, so that the story your images end up telling is as clear and easily understandable as possible. Again, lighting is your friend and can be used to emphasize the story your are trying to tell. Best case scenario for a dramatic image is when anyone can look at it, and tell you exactly what is going on in the photo, with no need for any explanatory text.

Be careful not to mix too many messages into one shoot or image: A woman with a headset, smiling at the camera tells a better story than if she is wearing a hard hat at the same time (is she in danger of getting stuff dropped on her head, as she sits by her desk?). This particular example may seem obvious to you, but it's actually one I have seen done several times.

Just like isolated objects isn't the only clean image, people-shots is not the only dramatic subject out there. Any shot that has action in it is dramatic. The aforementioned lightningstorm, car-crashes and the female praying mantis eating the male she just had sex with are all obvious examples of dramatic photograhs.

So, why is all this important? Why bother thinking in terms of clean and dramatic? Because it may help you analyze your work and figure out where your talent lies. Analyzing other people's images as well is a great tool to improving your understanding of why a particular image appeals to you – and what might make it appeal to others. By asking yourself whether a shot you like is one kind or the other, you could find clues as to what to focus on for your own portfolio, plan future shoots accordingly and help you build a strong portfolio. It will also let you concentrate on perfecting techniques that compliment your interests, from lighting to post-processing. I cannot stress enough how important it is to shoot things that you find interesting, rather than what you think others might buy or find useful. That said, there is no reason why shouldn't shoot what you love with salability in mind. There is a difference.

# Composing for Stock

The rule of thirds, the golden mean and all the classic pieces of advice for composing a good photograph still applies, when you're shooting stock. However, there are a few compositional tips that apply specifically to the stock genre.

The absolutely best piece of advice I can give anyone starting out in photography is to use the Rule of Thirds. This tip applies not only to stock, but to photography in general. For those who don't know, this is how it works: Split your image into thirds vertically and horizontally. Imagine that there are lines in your viewfinder that indicate where the thirds

split. and use these lines when composing an image. Try to place your main subject on one of these lines or on one of the spots, where a horizontal and a vertical line meet. Avoid placing your subject in the center of the frame. Following this little rule of thumb helped me greatly, when I was first starting out, and to this day, I see thousands of images come through the queue on iStockphoto, where the photographer could improved the image greatly by following this simple rule.

That said, the Rule of Thirds is not the end all road to stunning photography. By all means experiment and play, but as something to keep in the back of your mind, it does work wonders for achieving a more interesting picture.

## The Importance of Theory

Composition alone does not make an image great. No matter how perfectly you crop your shot, how interesting your angle might be and how nice your bokeh looks, if the lighting sucks, so will your image. And no matter how well lit your image is, a bad composition will still ruin the shot. Getting both of these right is hard to do, which is why there is a market for professional photographers out there in the first place. It's all really about understanding how an image works, what emotions are stirred in the viewer, when a photo is angled a certain way, lit a certain way or cropped a certain way. Practice and experimentation is half of that, and the other half is studying and analyzing pictures and advertisements.

It is the focus of my writings here to talk about stock imagery and how to get into that business, and by remembering that stock photos are for commercial use, you can train yourself to think in terms of usefulness and open-endedness, but that does not compensate for basic theory. Stock is not fine art, but the same fundamentals apply when it comes to the impact that composition and lighting will have on your final result. Supplementing your work by studying these things, including both classical artists and photography masters, will help you get the messages you want across in your pictures.

## Room for Copy and Isolated Images

Saving room for copy is a stock favorite that ties in nicely with the rule of thirds. Copy space is where the designer can plop his client's logo or whatever text needs to be in the ad. Like everyone else, designers are lazy people, and they like not having to move stuff around too much, in order to get the space they need for their copy. As a stock photographer, you can help them along. If for instance you have a still life shot,

featuring a lovely rustic vase and some fall flowers, you could place that on the left third of the image and make sure that your background has a nice gradient to it, that will support being used for text.

To practice this without shooting, simply take a look at the magazine-rack in your local bookstore or supermarket. Fashion and lifestyle magazines are great sources for learning about this. Notice how they all have their share of text on the cover and how the photographs used leave room for this text, without cluttering up the background. The same thing applies to web-banners, posters and everywhere else, where pictures and text meet.

Now, if you're going to eliminate the background completely and isolate your subject, you actually don't want to leave too much of your image blank. Since isolated images have nothing at all in the background, you would be wasting space by having too much of it. Get in closer to your subject instead and leave just enough white space around your subject, so that the designer can cut it out and place it in her own work.

The difference between shooting pictures with copy space and isolated subjects should be clear. Even if you leave space in an image for text, that doesn't mean the background needs to be completely blank. Gradients, bokeh and textures can make for excellent copy space, as long as there isn't too much going on. You will especially want to watch out for high contrasts and busy clutter in the background, but having something there will not hurt your image.

Related to this issue is cropping your subject. There is an ongoing debate in the stock community about whether it is okay to crop your subject or if you should leave that to the designer. As an example, if I take a close up portrait of you, is it okay to crop the image to cut off the top of your head or should I back off enough to keep your entire head in the frame? The answer is that it doesn't really matter that much. Some designers prefer to do all the cropping themselves whereas others just want to find an image that is pre-cropped the way they want it. There is a good market for both, but it is still something to keep in mind, when you're looking through the viewfinder, and if you're shooting a session anyway, try to capture both a cropped and an uncropped version. You never know which one will be better.

## Getting the Angle Right

An often overlooked part of composing images, whether it be for stock or otherwise, is taking the angle into consideration. Where is the camera looking from and what does that angle do for your subject? Depending on your subject and genre, different angles will be more useful than others. Common sense is really your best tool here, as well as knowing what angles can do for most any subjects.

Shooting something straight on may seem like the most boring angle, but it can often be very useful for stock, since the lack of dramatic effect leaves more of the image open to

interpretation. If you shoot a model from below, she would get a more dramatic appearance, making her look slightly aloof or villainous (or maybe fat, if your angle is unflattering enough). Everything looks a little bigger and more looming from below, making it great for shooting skyscrapers or insects (an ant shot slightly from below will look infinitely more intimidating than one shot from above). Opposite is the shot from above, which tends to offer a lighter and airier perspective, making everything look smaller. People look more innocent when shot at a high angle, like when you're looking down at a child.

A final note on angles goes towards tilting your camera. Sometimes a slight tilt in one direction or the other can help to add a sense of speed, movement or action to your images. If there are already lines going across your subject, you can utilize these to create a sense of perspective by tilting your camera. This is something that's fun to play around with but must be used with care. Not all subjects render themselves equally well to this technique.

So, to sum it all up: Use composition to take your images out of the dreaded snapshot-zone and let it help tell the story, you are trying to convey. Leave room for copy and try experimenting with cropping creatively (or composing so that designers can easily do the same). Get down on the floor and shoot up under your subjects, climb a stepladder to shoot down. Do all this with all kinds of subjects to find out what you like, then study what others have done that works. Most of the time, the results will be similar.

# Lighting Your Stock Images

Lighting is one of the most important aspects of photography, whether it's for stock or not. Mastering light can take a lifetime and though many excellent books have been written on the subject, there really is no substitute for hands-on practice. In this part of my stock-series, I will take a look at the most common types of lighting and what kind of pictures they are good for. This is not an end-all lighting tutorial, but I hope you can find something in these paragraphs to help you build a better stock portfolio, simply by keeping some of this basic advice in mind.

Generally speaking, most good stock images are pretty evenly lit, except images where creative lighting is used to get a specific, dramatic effect. However, for most purposes, try to get a lot of mid-tones in your pictures and watch out for high contrasts. Learn to read the histogram and don't trust simply using your camera's display to check your images.

Underexposing your shots is particularly dangerous because dark images have a tendency to also have more noise and pixel discoloration in them. The short explanation for this is, that there is less data in dark parts of digital photos, so when you lighten it later, your post-processing software will have to guess what the dark parts should look

like. And thusly, pixel discoloration and noise is born. It is always easier to darken a mid-tone than to brighten a dark spot.

High contrast areas come with the risk of chromatic aberration, also known as purple fringing, which can get your images rejected from iStockphoto very fast. Using good lenses and full-frame cameras can help this, and in some cases you can fix slight fringing afterwards (if you shoot RAW), but with bright light and dark elements mixed together, there is always a risk of the dreaded fringing showing up.

### Beware of the Sun

Natural light is the most readily available lightsource. It's free and there for you all day long. But sunlight is not always your friend, because it tends to be very harsh, creating equally harsh shadows and possibly blown out highlights in your images. Many images that get rejected for poor lighting are suffering from this issue. Staying away from the mid day hours and direct sunlight is a good way to avoid the most common problems. Try instead to shoot in the shade or wait until the lighting is softer, typically in the afternoon.

*This image was shot in sunlight with a gold bounce to soften the shadows.*

If you're out and about, and you just see that one thing, you simply must have in your portfolio, all hope is still not lost. Deep shadows created by sunligt can be softened if you have a bounce. A bounce is basically a shiny surface used to bounce light back at your subject. By bouncing light into the shadowy parts, you can either soften or completely eliminate dark shadows. You can buy good travel-sized bounces with several types of surfaces (silver for cool tones, gold for warmth, white for neutral etc.) for less than $50 and they are really worth every penny. With some of them, you can take off the shiny part and use it as a diffuser, which is your other alternative to dealing with direct sunlight – putting something in front of it. Diffusers are basically thin, white sheets that let some of the light through, softening it along the way to turn down the harshness. Kind of like a softbox or a cloud.

The problem with both of these is that they are somewhat cumbersome to use, if you don't have someone to hold the bounce/diffuser for you. One way around this problem is to use a tripod and a remote, lining up the shot in the viewfinder and then holding the bounce yourself. A better solution is to have someone assist you, of course.

For landscape photos or pictures with a lot of background, the bounce might not cut it. In these cases, using bracketing might help you. Place your camera on a tripod and

shoot three of the same shots with different settings (most cameras have a built in bracketing function), and use the different photos to create a single, balanced image in post-processing. This is a fairly advanced technique that will require a bit of practicing, but you can really get astounding results with it, especially for landscapes, sunsets and similar subjects.

## Strobes, hotlights and studio lighting

Most photographers will want to invest in some kind of studio-type setup at some point. Here is another area where it is all too easy to spend a small fortune on equipment you will never need. Keep in mind that you're shooting microstock, which earns you a little at a time. Don't spend a lot of money on something that will never make itself back. Another common misconception is that more light is better. For most pictures you will not need five lights set up all over the place. I recommend getting a small setup first that you can expand on later, if you need to. Two strobes or hotlights is a great way to begin, and if you get one of the cheaper kits, you can get everything you need for about $300.

I sometimes get questions about which solution to pick, strobes or hotlights. Each have their advantages and my answer is always: it depends on what you're shooting. If people is your thing, definitely go for the strobes. Nobody likes posing in front of a couple of hot lamps for hours and you will get a lot of shiny foreheads (or learn make-up), if you use hotlights for shooting models. However, if still life or product shots is your thing, you may want to consider hotlights, as these are easier to pose.

Posing strobes and hotlights is the trickiest part of shooting with studio lighting. The optimal setting for using these lightsrouces is a dark room, where no other lights can interfere with your setup. By shooting fairly high shutterspeeds, you can eliminate ambient light more or less, but it is when posing your modelling lights, the dark studio really comes in handy. Strobes come with built in modelling lights to give you an idea of, how the light will fall when the strobes go off. In most of the cheaper kits however, the modelling light is really weak, to the point where they are almost worthless. Hotlights obviously don't have this problem, since they are constantly putting out the same light anyway. Again, practicing is the best way forward, no matter what you're shooting with. Bounces are often effective in combination with studio lighting as well, and you can get a stand to hold it for you.

## Speedlights and flashes

Before proceding any further, let me just say this: That built-in flash on your camera? Forget it exists. Don't use it. Ever. Direct flash is one of the worst types of lighting and an instant killer for stock photos. It creates the same harsh shadows as sunlight does, only not even looking natural, and the flash has a tendency to only light up whatever is directly in front of your camera. You can argue that direct flash can be used as a fill flash in certain situations, but even so, the results are often not good enough for stock use.

The way to go, is to invest in a speedlight – a mountable flash-unit that can swivel and turn, to let you use it indirectly. A speedlight will let you bounce light off of walls, ceilings and, well, bounces, giving you much better control and results. If you are a photographer on the move, a speedlight will be one of the best investments you can make.

Now, when you're bouncing the light off of various surfaces, you will notice that two things come into consideration: Distance to the surface acting as a bounce, and the type of surface it is. A red stucco wall will bounce completely differently than a mirror, just like tall ceilings will suck up all the light, while low ones will bounce a lot of it back. Again, this is something that takes practice, but is a lot of fun to experiment with. You might be surprised at how different surfaces can get you creative results. Speedlights are not cheap, often costing about the same as a cheap strobe kit, and some models are more advanced than others, offering things like linking series of speedlights for complete, studiolike setups. Personally, I have a cheap one and have never once needed any of the advanced features, the more expensive models have to offer.

### A note on White Balance

Different types of light, have different color temperatures. Even if you don't know anything about Kelvin or how light is measured, you might notice that some of your shots have a blue or orange hue, that wasn't there when you were looking through the viewfinder. That would be your white balance being off. For an image to have correct color tones, you will need to make sure the white balance is right. If you shoot in RAW, you can adjust the balance afterwards and most cameras have a pretty decent auto function, for getting it right in the first place, but don't rely on this too much. There is a great article about the more technical aspects of this on iStockphoto, including everything you need to make sure white balance never becomes an issue for you.

# 10 Common Mistakes by New Stock Photographers

Shooting stock comes with its own set of rules, and while rules are indeed meant to be broken, it requires that you know what you're doing, or you might end up getting your images turned down by inspectors such as myself and my colleagues on iStockphoto. In the following, I will list 10 of the most common mistakes made by new photographers. If you think some of the advice here looks obvious, that's a good sign you're already one step of other people starting out.

### 1. Don't Copy Other Photographers

This should be the most obvious of all the tips, yet it is one that cannot be repeated enough. Not only is blatant copying a kind of theft, it will also get you a reputation

amongst your peers as a ripper. Other photographers will be wary of you and might start following your work, just to turn you in and protect their own work. If a particular photo really rocks your world, by all means try to replicate it to learn how it was done – but don't upload it as your own afterwards. Consider it practice.

The line between inspiration and copyism is very thin in the stock world, since many pictures are based on the same themes and metaphors. A really good tip, when you're planing your shoot, is to search for existing pictures covering the same subject, so you know what to avoid. Or at least make sure you mix it up enough, that your own style is applied to the work.

### 2. Save at the Highest Possible Quality

Every time you save a jpg-file, it is compressed a little more. Even if you do save at the highest setting. The result is degrading image quality, which may lead to noise and compression artifacts and ultimately image rejection. Shooting in RAW is your first step to avoiding this, and if you need to save your work mid-way through editing, save it as a PSD of TIFF file, which does not compress the image. Only at the very end of image processing, should you save the photo as a jpg, and then you should pick the highest possible quality. Don't ever use Photoshop's save for web feature, when processing stock images. It will mess with you colors and cause bad compression.

### 3. Avoid High ISO

Try to always shoot at ISO 100 or lower. Noise is one of the most common reasons for image rejections, and high ISO means more noise. Some argue that it is comparable to grain in film images, but digital noise does not have same qualities as film grain, and it simply looks bad. Sometimes higher ISO is necessary to avoid blurryness, but try to keep it no higher than 200. Very rarely will a photo taken at ISO 400 be good enough, and anything higher than that will almost certainly not get accepted.

### 4. Watch Your Filters

There are many fun and artsy filters, you can apply to your pictures, but when you're shooting stock, you will want to be very careful about not overdoing it. As a rule of thumb, if an applied filter looks unreal or doesn't blend in perfectly with the overall image, you've gone too far. The same goes for noise reduction, which can erase detail and give your photo a plastic look if overdone. Other examples of over filtering include using a water ripple filter, to make fake watery reflections, and fake cross-processing.

### 5. Mind Edges and Background

Oftentimes when a photo falls into the snapshot category, which is likely to get your work rejected, it is because attention was not paid to the background. Your image is more than just the subject in the front. The position of the horizon, the amount of clutter, placement of things like lights, windows and other people, all of this and more might mess up your background.

You might think that, if you shoot isolated objects, this is not important. If you successfully manage to get a completely white background (or whatever color you are isolating against), this is true to a certain extent, but you will still need to pay attention to the edges and blown out highlights. If your subject is lit, so that the highlights blend into the background, you've got a problem. All edges should be watched carefully when isolating – is it too hard or too soft?

Related to this is the crop of your image. If you've cropped your image, so it looks like your model has half an arm, this will take away from the value of the photo, both from a usefulness point of view and when the inspector is looking at it. Creative cropping is fine. Sloppy cropping is not.

### 6. Watch the Lighting

Most of this has already been mentioned, but lighting is so important, I will sum it up again here: Never ever use direct flash. Avoid harsh light and the equally harsh shadows it creates. Finally, also in relation to edges and background, you should watch for purple fringing. All of this is discussed in greater detail in my entry about lighting in stock photography.

### 7. Logos and Copyrighted Stuff

It should go without saying, that putting a logo in your stock photo is a violation of that particular trademark. Likewise, if you take a picture that features someone else's artwork, that artwork is most likely subject to copyright and may not be used for royalty free stock. The exception to this is art in the public domain (not the same as being shown in public), and it really comes down to research. You would be surprised at the things, that are trademarked and copyrighted, and if you are in doubt about something, google it and check for any official websites and legal information offered there. And if you find that what you have is okay to use, make sure you put a note to that effect in your image description.

This can be painstaking work, but in the end it could mean the difference between having an image rejected or accepted. My advice is to do what the image inspectors do:

Err on the side of caution. In the end, if someone is sued for copyright infringement, it will be you and not the stock agency.

### 8. Text in Your Images

Generally speaking, any kind of text in stock photography takes away from the usefulness, because it narrows the ways in which the photo can be used. Pictures of signs with text on it, will often fall into the snapshot category as well, which means that it has very slim chances of making it into your stock portfolio, and even worse is digitally added text, which is almost always instantly recognizable as such, and ties into the whole creative filtering thing (as in: it looks fake). In other words: Don't take pictures of pure text and don't add it to your images afterwards.

A classic mistake is the picture with copy space (a good thing), where the photographer has added "Your text here" across it in post processing. Leave it blank and let the designers use it without having to first remove what you put in.

### 9. Check at Full Resolution

Avoiding noise and taking your processing too far is to some extent a matter of keeping an eye on your work as you go. Doing that requires you to check and re-check what you're about to upload at 100% resolution. It's easier to get an overall idea of your image by looking at a smaller version that fits on your monitor, but at 50% you won't see pixel discoloration or the plastic-like result of too much noise reduction.

Make it a habit to zoom in to full resolution after each change to your photo, and check for degradation of quality. Pay special attention to darker areas (pixel discoloration), color gradients (chunky noise and banding) and spots with fine detail (loss of said detail). These are spots where image degradation is most easily noticed and the first places an image inspector will look.

### 10. Be Selective

Your stock portfolio is meant for commercial use. Keep this in mind and leave your holiday snapshots for Flickr and e-mailing friends and family. Occasionally snapshots will be good enough to have commercial value, but uploading everything you shoot will only lower the overall quality of your portfolio and probably get you a ton of frustrating rejection notices.

Being selective is more than avoiding snapshots however. Even if you have a model, a good background and a concept behind your shoot, you shouldn't upload everything that's on your compact flash card. Make every image in your portfolio different enough to stand out from the others in the same series. Not only will you save designers from

having to decide between five images that look almost exactly the same, but your portfolio will just look better, if it's more than endless repetition. Stand out by being selective and appear more professional in doing so.

Personally, I try to aim for uploading 1 in 10 shots, but most of the time, I end up with something closer to half of that, which is still totally fine, since I shoot at least a couple of hundred shots per session. If you have a hard time picking, enlist the help of others. Ask them which one they would pick and why. If you haven't been copying other photographers, you will find that they can be excellent helpers in a case like this.

Common sense and understanding the difference between good photography and usable stock is really the key to getting a good image acceptance ratio. If you find that only half of what you upload gets through the inspection process, referring to this list might be a good place to start, but don't let it discourage you too much. Even seasoned photographers miss the occasional logo and have a hard time picking which photos to upload, and while image rejections are frustrating, they will help you understand how to find that balance and ultimately make you a better stock photographer.

# Building a Microstock Portfolio

Getting started as a microstock photographer can be an intimidating task. In this introduction to portfolio building, I will attempt to touch on all the most important basics and give you a good start. Some of the aspects of this topic have already been covered in previous posts and others will be in the posts to come. So, think of the following, as sort of a checklist or recap to help you get started.

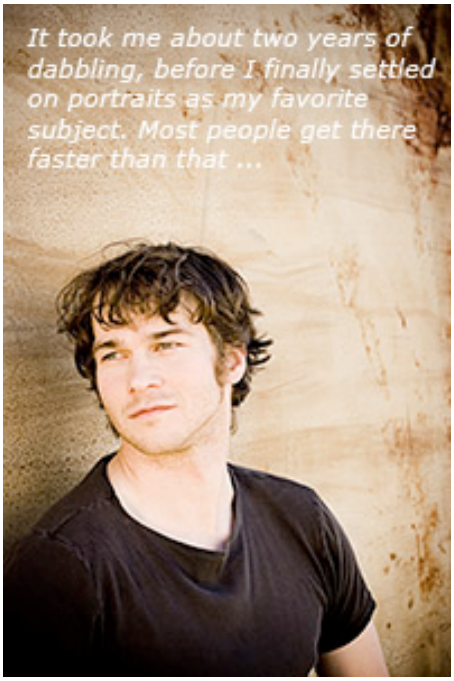
One thing you must do, no matter if you're beginner or a seasoned stock photogrpaher, is to keep those pictures coming. Stagnated portfolios will experience dropping sales, which can eat away your motivation and even kill your microstock career completely. Aim for uploading new images every single week, even if it's just a couple. Here is why: Search results are often sorted by age, listing the latest images first. If all your images are old, they will get buried. If you've got just one image on the first page, there's a chance that a designer will click on that and from there to the rest of your portfolio. A continuous stream of fresh imagery will get you noticed and generate more sales for your entire collection.

Measuring the success of a microstock portfolio can be hard to do. In the end, it depends on your own expectations, but a good, achievable goal to aim for is one monthly download per photo in your portfolio. It probably won't spread out evenly across your all your active photos, but you will have big sellers that will make up for the non-movers and even things out in the end. There are quite a few photographers who sell much more than 1-to-1, but don't expect to achieve this ratio right off the bat. In all likelihood, your sales won't truly stabilize until you find a niche. Once you've

successfully held up this ratio for a few months months straight, you can start setting your goals higher.

## Finding Your Niche

There is no doubt about it: Specialized photographers sell more images. When designers get to know your work and your niche, chances are they will come to you first, when looking for a photo in your particular genre, and when that happens, you've successfully established yourself as a stock photographer, beating out the competition by building a brand name of your own. But don't try to figure out which genre will sell better. There really is a market for all sorts of images, as long as they are well executed. Instead, shoot what you love shooting and turn your passion into what you're known for. Not only will it make you a happier photographer, but the passion will come across in your work as well.


It took me about two years of dabbling, before I finally settled on portraits as my favorite subject. Most people get there faster than that ...

But let's take a step back for a second and ask, how you find out what you love to shoot. Most photographers only have a vague idea of this at first and need to dabble a bit, before finding their niche. When you're first starting out, dabbling is exactly what I recommend: Actively seeking out variation and experimenting with different genres and styles. Do different series from senior portraits to landscapes, macros to architecture, animals to abstracts. Soon you will discover that ideas come more easily to you with some subjects than others, and don't be surprised, if you discover that you really love something, you'd never even tried shooting before.

Personally, I love shooting portraits and working with models, because each session is a new challenge, and I enjoy the interaction and how my direction is interpreted by the person, I am working with. Others enjoy the total control and perfection they can get from still life photography. It's all about what suits your personality.

Whether you like one or the other, I would definitely recommend working with models at an early stage. If you need practice to build up the courage to ask strangers to model (not to mention signing a model release), start by shooting your friends and family. They may not look like the models in your favorite magazine, but the truth is that most stock models don't and that there is a huge market for normal looking people out there.

Why work with models? Because it is one of the major hurdles new photographers have to get over. Many new shooters have apprehensions when it comes to shooting people,

and simply by crossing that threshold, you have taken another step in finding confidence. And having confidence in your work will help you grow.

## Crunching Numbers

Never be picky when you're shooting. Try everything that pops into your head and shoot it in as many ways, you can think of. Sometimes, you will end up with a lucky shot or get that whole learning-by-doing experience. Being picky about what you upload however, is extremely important when building a portfolio. If your series have a lot of images that look very similar, you might actually hurt your portfolio. By all means, you should provide a varied selection, so designers have something to choose from, but be careful you don't overdo it. You don't want to confuse the designer by making it hard for them to pick (which will likely lead to them going elsewhere).

So, to get you started, try the following rule: Don't upload more than one in ten images from the same shoot. Even if you changed things up a lot, switched outfits, locations and props. One in ten is your limit. Later on, you'll most likely get even pickier, but since you're still learning, allowing yourself a little leeway is a good thing.

Expect that half of everything you upload will get rejected at first. Half is pretty common for new photographers, who are still learning what makes good stock and lives up to the technical standards.

In other words: You shoot 200 pictures in a short session, upload 20 and have 10 accepted. It may not sound like much, but you can easily shoot 200 shots in an hour, and if just one of your shots is a hit, it could end up earning you hundreds if not thousands of dollars. Remember that these numbers are based on an average beginner's uploads and approval rate. As you improve and the quality of your work gets higher, so will the number of accepted files and the sales per image.

## Process Your Images

Too many new photographers do not process their images beyond transferring them from their memory card to their computers, but no post processing means a duller image, because all cameras have a tendency to lack contrast and color intensity, both of which would help make your images pop out on search result pages. It will look more like just another snapshot and less like a professional photograph, if you don't do any post processing, and even if it should pass image inspection, it will very likely go unnoticed and drown among the thousands of other (and better) images available. So write this on a piece of paper and tack it to your wall: Never upload unprocessed photos as stock.

Photoshop (or Photoshop Elements) is the way to go, and yes, if you've never worked with these tools before, they can be confusing or even downright scary. Don't let that

hold you back. Instead, take comfort in the fact, that you really only need to do a bare minimum of processing. Adjusting contrast and colors is all you really need, though taking it a step further and touching up things like skin certainly won't hurt your sales.

Later on, I will cover the basics in greater detail, but I strongly recommend going beyond what I offer here. Post processing requires practice like any other skill, and the best thing you can do is to take classes or get some tutoring. When I finally got around to taking actual classes, I had been using Photoshop for years, yet I still learned something new every single time. If you have no access to a personal mentor, get yourself a book or two, subscribe to relevant podcasts and check out a few magazines. But most importantly: Practice and play around.

One tip I can give you right now is to process similar images at the same time. If you shot a still life and have a bunch of pictures with basically the same lighting and setup, processing them simultaneously will give them a more unified look and feel, and equally important, it will speed up the overall process and help you get your images ready for upload faster.

## Get Organized

If you don't already have a system in place, getting your archives organized is a very good idea. It seems there are as many ways of doing this, as there are photographers, but the basic things you will want your archive to do is: Help you keep track of what you've got and when you got it, what you've already processed and uploaded, and what has yet to be worked on. As your shoots get larger, you might not finish processing everything before you have a new session going, and you will end up with unprocessed material from the previous shoot. If you're anything like me, you'll be itching to get some of this new stuff up. The only downside to that is, that without proper archiving, you might lose track of those older shots, you were going to upload or confuse them with images that have already been uploaded.

I have a folder for every year and within that, a folder for every photosession. I name these folders with a shoot number and a keyword or two, to help me remember what's inside the folder, without having to open it to take a look. I keep all my RAW files inside these folders.

When I finish a new session, I immediately do a rough sort using Adobe Bridge (you could use things like Adobe Lightroom, Aperture or any other image organizer). At this point, I pick images from the thumbnail alone, looking only at composition and lighting. Bridge allows me to color label my images, so I apply a yellow label to all the potential images I see, and then set it to show me only those images. If there are too many that look the same, I will sort through those, removing the yellow label from the less interesting or otherwise inferior ones.

Once I have a nice, varied selection of yellow-label photos, I check them all out at 100% and discard any that don't have good enough focus or suffer from other technical problems. At this point, all I am left with is the cream of the crop, based on composition, lighting, variation and detail quality. Now, I can start processing.

As I finish and upload images, I change the color label to green for images that were accepted and red for ones that didn't make it. If I need to save an image half-way through processing, I will label it blue, to show that it's a work in progress.

I keep the finished jpg-files in a seperate archive, also organized by year, but with no sub-folders beyond that. Only photos that actually made it into my stock portfolio live here, rejected images are put in a seperate Folder of Shame. Even if images are later deactivated from my portfolio, I keep them in my jpg-archives as a testament to how my skills have improved, since I originally uploaded the image.

Occasionally culling your online portfolio is, as I have mentioned before, a good idea. There will come a time, when your early work suddenly seems embarrassingly bad, compared to your current skill level, or you'll have older images that never got any sales. Getting rid of these will give your portfolio an overall facelift, making it more streamlined and appealing to those who browse it. But by all means, keep a copy of everything for yourself.

Picking the right time of day can make all the difference, when you're out shooting on location. This was shot during a photo-safari in Seattle...

## 5 Sessions to Get Started on Microstock

Building a portfolio of stock photography is a daunting task. Many new photographers ask where to begin, so here is a short list of photo sessions you can use. I have tried to keep them generic enough, that you have room to interpret each one in your own way.

When shooting these, try to get 200 shots done for every session. In the previous article, I mentioned a 1:10 ratio, meaning that you should only upload about one in ten shots to your portfolio, in order to keep it varied enough. I also said that new photographers should expect around half of those images to be accepted. So, if you shoot all five sessions described here and upload according to this, the average beginner would come out with about 50 pictures in their portfolio. A good start for anyone.

Each session should take no more than one day to shoot and sort, and another day or two for processing and uploading. By days, I don't mean full work days, but something

you could fit in to a normal schedule without having to quit your day job. A good goal is to aim for one complete session a week, which should leave you enough time to prepare and have a social life at the same time.

**Session 1: The Photosafari**

Description: The idea is to go somewhere and walk around with your camera out, ready to shoot whatever you happen to spot. You can use your own neighborhood or somewhere else, but it's important that you travel on foot during the actual shooting.

Good shots: Textures, landscapes and architecture. You might be able to get some good abstract shots as well.

Pitfalls: When on photosafari, it's very easy to start firing off snapshots. Try to avoid this by thinking about each shot. Lighting is all important as well here, and you will be dependent on the weather a lot.

Gear: Good walking shoes. You might also want to bring a tripod, if you're planning on shooting sunsets or dimly lit areas.

**Session 2: Seasonal Still Life**

Description: Pick your favorite season and gather about 10 or so props to go with it. Set up a nice background and set up a number of different shots, shuffling your props around as you go. Try not to use more than 4-5 props at a time, to avoid cluttering your photos. As an example, you could pick Valentine's Day and use props like: Chocolate, flowers, heart-shaped giftboxes, jewelry, cards (watch for copyrighted artwork on those) and whatever else you can think of.

Good shots: Shallow depth of field, rich lighting and saturated colors. Paintinglike compositions.

Pitfalls: Clutter from too many props or in the background. Keep it simple. Not mixing it up enough, ending up with too many too similar shots. Experiment and play around instead of trying to play it safe.

Gear: Diffused lighting is your friend here. Bathe your subject in warm sunlight, if you don't have access to hotlights. A bounce might help eliminate harsh shadows.

**Session 3: The Self Portrait**

Description: Shooting yourself is not as easy as it sounds. As an exercise, it will help you understand what it takes to direct models a little better, as you start to see the difference between looking through the viewfinder and guessing what it might look like in the shot. Dress yourself up or not, that doesn't matter. Keep the background simple, so focus will be on you and nothing else.

Good shots: Expressive photos. Make lots of faces and strike just as many funky poses. You might want to change clothes a couple of times, wear a hat, sunglasses and whatever other personal accessories you can think of.

Pitfalls: Getting lots of out-of-focus pictures from moving around. You might want to experiement with setting your focus point, using manual focus and check your camera every few shots until you've gotten the hang of it.

Gear: A tripod is almost a must for this one. A remote trigger is another great accessory, though most cameras have a time release function.

**Session 4: Everyday Situations**

Description: Grab a friend, a family member or your significant other and have that person pose for you. Use your home (or your friend's) as a backdrop and take picture of him or her doing everyday things, from folding laundry to talking on the phone.

Good shots: Pictures that show both hands doing something as well as the model's face. Expressions that go with the shot, like excitement in a shot of someone playing a console game or disgust when cleaning a toilet.

Pitfalls: Long shutterspeeds give unwanted blur, watch for present logos and make sure the background goes with whatever the subject is.

Gear: Strobes and speedlights are great for this. You might also use a bounce.

**Session 5: The Work Situation**

Description: As before, but this time you go to your model's workplace (or somewhere that looks like a job location) and shoot photos of your model in action. There is a huge market for work-related shots, so it doesn't matter much if your model is posing as a baker or a lawyer.

Good shots: Whatever shows the various tasks involved with the job, you're photographing. Include relevant props and shoot both posed and candid pictures.

Pitfalls: Make sure you get permission, before shooting at an actual workplace. Also, watch for logos.

Gear: A speedlight might come in handy here, if you're in a place that has bad light.

All of these are meant to be exercises as well as sessions, making your work with various types of photography. You don't need to use the gear I have listed for each session, though doing so might help you get a better overall result. But if you don't have the things listed, don't let that stop you from shooting. The important thing is getting the

work done with the concept of stock in mind. Think about the lighting, the composition and try to make your shots as good as possible from a stock point of view.

Doing these exercises with a friend might be helpful to you as well. Not only can you act as assistants to each other, holding bounces, positioning props and swapping suggestions, but simply having some creative company will help spark inspiration and make you have more fun. You might even sit down afterwards and help each other sort through your pictures. If you have a hard time choosing the best pictures from each session, perhaps a friend can help you decide.

# Leaving Out the People

If you want to build a microstock portfolio, you don't have to shoot people. Many people think they have to, but if you prefer shooting other things, that's exactly what you should be doing. And there's a big market for these pictures as well. Architecture is great for real estate material, and tranquil landscapes or personal accessory still life shots are useful for spas and well-being brochures. Just to mention a couple.

Obviously, there is a huge difference between shooting landscapes and studio still life. Each has its own techniques and requires its own set of skills, but if we look at them from the perspective of a microstock photographer, they do have a few things in common. Here are five tips for shooting all sorts of photos with no people in them.

### 1. Start with a concept

Planning your shoots is the first step towards going from snapshooter to photographer. If you're setting out to shoot landscapes or cityscapes, start by brainstorming the kinds of shots you want. You may want to think in terms of concepts as well as compositions. Consider what your location has to offer and try to imagine what kind of stories, you can tell with your photos. The more stories you can tell, the more useful the image will be. Concepts for outdoor photograpy could include things like "Tranquility in Nature", "Rush Hour Traffic" or "First Home Real Estate".

If you're setting up a home studio and gathering props for still life, you are not bound by your location so much, as you are by these accessories. In this case, you will want to brainstorm before you go shopping. Make a theme for every session (such as "Back to School" or "Gardening Season") and list all the props you can think of. Then scratch the ones that are too big to fit in your space or too expensive to purchase, simply for the sake of a photo shoot. Don't forget that sometimes you have to spend money to make money, and if you end up buying something, you can't really use, you can always give it to someone who can. Once you have a list of items, make a list of all the shots you can do with them. Chances are that some props will be more versatile than others, so you need your list of shot-ideas to prioritize which ones to get first.

## 2. Straighten the lines

One thing that almost all kinds of stock photographs have in common, is that they have a clean look to them, and when you're shooting outdoors, getting that look can sometimes be challenging. However, there is help to be found in post processing. There are a number of tools you can use to straighten the lines in your photos, which will add a whole lot of cleanliness to your finished image.

What are the lines I am talking about? Horizons for one. If the horizon in your photo is slightly slanted (as opposed to straight or even "creatively angled"), it gives the photo a sloppy look. Like you weren't really paying attention, when you were shooting it. Crookedness doesn't always come from sloppy work though. Things like lens distortion (wide angle lenses have a tendency to bend things around the edges of the photo, yet they lend themselves well to landscapes because they are, well, wide) and where you were standing, when you took the picture, can play a part in how the lines look.

I have an article on iStockphoto about some of the tools you can use to fix the problems with crooked lines.

## 3. Watch your scale

So, you went to the Grand Canyon and took some photos. Good for you. However, it is very likely that the vastness of the landscape is lost, because there is nothing small in the photo to compare it to. Just like those really tight macro shots, where they put a match in so you can see how tiny the subject really is, the same goes for huge and vast subjects. You have to have something that shows the viewer of the photo, what size we are talking about. If there's a small house nearby, an abandoned car or something else that has a size we all know and can relate to, then try to include that in your photo.

If you are shooting something really small, and you don't want to toss a match into your picture, consider other things, that might show the actual size. An espresso cup looks just like any other coffee cup, but if you add a few beans around it, it becomes obvious that it's actually smaller than a normal cup. Items to scale with is something else to include in your planning, when you're brainstorming your next session.

## 4. Get creative

Let's face it. Anyone can take a picture of a sunset or of a stack of books. And tons of people do all the time. So, if you want to stand out, you gotta get your hands dirty. When you're thinking up new shoots, don't hold yourself back. List everything and anything, that might make your take on whatever the subject is unique. It might be a combination of lighting and props, location and props or different angles than usual.

Using color is a great way to make your pictures stand out. Whether it's in the form of colored light or how the background and foreground compliment each other. You can also tweak your lighting in post processing, which can add all sorts of dramatic effects (just don't overdo it - nobody likes an over filtered image).

I purposely used a wide angle to make this shot a little weird. The dark tones compliment the angle to create a spooky ambience...

### 5. Watch for logos

You would be surprised to learn how many things are either trademarked or copyright protected. You can take a picture of the Eiffel Tower and upload it to your portfolio. But if it's night and the lights are on it, you can't, beause the lighting is protected from commercial use without a special license. You want to take a picture of an open bottle of wine? Excellent, just as long as you know that in all likelihood, the little decorative symbol on the side of the cork is copyrighted. Interior decoration shots can be awesome - but make sure you take all the art off the walls before shooting. Skylines? Lots of skyscrapers have logos on the top.

There are protected bits and pieces everywhere these days and it's your responsibility to make sure, you have the right to use whatever you shoot commercially. I highly recommend doing a little research, if you think your subject might be protected. Google it and check out any related and official websites. If there is a phone number you might want to give them a call and ask about royalty free use of your subject.

If there is artwork in your shots, you might be able to secure a property release from the artist (not whoever bought the artwork, copyright will be with the original creator), allowing you to use it in your photo. Another way to deal with this issue, is to only shoot generic brand and vintage stuff. But don't limit yourself to these, just because you're too lazy to do the research or too afraid of a lawsuit. If you do shoot something with a logo in it, chances are that the image inspectors will catch it and send the image back to you for logo removal.

### Set Yourself Apart

The great thing about microstock is that anyone can do it, but not everyone will be equally successful. What makes the difference between those who try and those who succeed, is taking your work beyond just shooting and uploading. Putting a little thought and a little effort before, during and after the actual shoot can help set you apart from the masses. It's really not so much about gear as it is about originality. Therefore, and I

think, I've mentioned this before as well, the best thing you can do in preperation for any shoot, is to check out what's already out there.

Check out what sells and (just as importantly) what doesn't, so you know what works and what to avoid. Just remember to not copy other photographers. Give things your own twist and end up with a unique, useful and original product.

# Working with Models

Models, in this case not necessarily referring to professional fashion models, but rather anyone you put in front of a camera, are different from shooting objects, in that you need to communicate with them as you go. Models move around and are often uncomfortable in front of the camera, and it's your job to make them look good. Likewise, many photographers who are just starting out, find it difficult and intimidating to work with models, not knowing how to properly direct them. An important thing for photographers to remember in this situation is, that the model wants good pictures as much as you do, and that directing is not the same as bossing someone around against their will. Getting good people shots is all about cooperation in a relaxed atmosphere.

Most photographers out there want to work with models, and when you're doing stock photography, you can pretty much use any type of model for a good, commercial photo. The notion of finding willing models and asking for signed releases, can seem like a huge step to take. And it is. But the sooner you get into it, the faster you'll get used to the idea. And that's where the fun can begin.

### The Model Release

All stock photos with recognizable people must come with a model release, stating that the model has given consent to the photos being sold as royalty free stock and that they understand the implications of this. In other words: It's a piece of paper that gives you permission as well as protection, in case problems arise down the road.

The iStockphoto release also requires a third party witness to sign the release. A standard form is provided that covers all the basics, and I highly recommend using this over any kind of homemade document. Be sure to read this and help your models understand it as well. It's pretty straight forward and based on common sense — nothing to be afraid of.

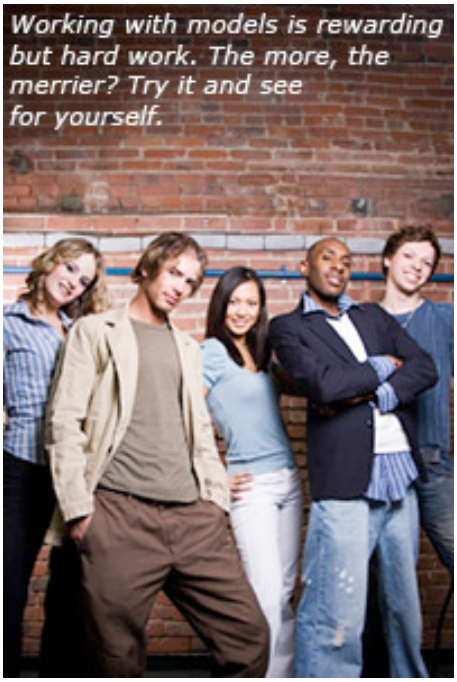
### Start Close to Home

For your first shoots, get someone you are already comfortable with to stand in front of the camera. A family member or a close friend is a perfect way to start. To get good

pictures, it is vital that both you and the model are relaxed and able to have fun, and getting that is a lot easier with someone you know. Expect your first few photos to be a little stiff and probably not stock worthy, and focus on just having a good time. Soon, your model will loosen up and you'll find yourself directing with greater ease.

After your first four or five shoots, you may want to expand into using unfamiliar faces. To get started with that, I highly recommend using websites like ModelMayhem to find amateur models, who are looking to expand their portfolios. Often these models will do time for print/cd (tfp/tfcd), which means that you give them a set of fully processed photos for their portfolios in return for their services. It's a win-win deal for everyone involved.

Whether your model is someone you know or not, I suggest you pamper them a little before and during the shoot. Have a few snacks on hand, buy them a cup of coffee or offer to pay their parking. These little gestures will give you a good reputation and make your work a lot easier.




### Plan Ahead

You don't have to plan out every frame in advance, but you should definitely have a general idea or theme in place, and preferably find suitable clothes and props as well. For a single session of about an hour or so, I would suggest having a couple of outfits and no more than three or four props. You don't want to waste too much time changing clothes or trying to figure out which prop to use.

If you have your preparations done beforehand, you will also automatically have an idea of some poses, compositions and angles to go with them, making it easier to start directing your model when the shoot begins. If some of the poses are particularly important, you may want to repeat them near the end of the shoot, when the early stiffness has gone.

### Keep the Shoot Going

As tempting as it is to stop and check your pictures along the way, you should keep this to a minimum. Every time you stop, you cool down a little and will have to get back into it. The same goes for your model. Plus, if you save the looking through of the images for after the actual shooting, it will act as a small reward for your hard work.

This is the same reason, why you shouldn't have too many outfits or set changes to go through during the shoot. Everything that slows you down, will take away from the creative energy.

## Play Games

Playing around is a great way to build up a comfort zone and can get you some unexpected inspiration mid-shoot. I have two small games, that helps get the model loosened up.

I call the first one "Say it!". If I am shooting a model who is supposed to look like they are very pleased with the book they are reading, I will have them actually say it out loud. It's silly, but it works. Or if I am shooting someone who is supposed to look like they have a toothache, I might ask them to make the sound of someone in pain. The sound may not be captured by the camera, but the expression that comes from it will.

"Click 'n' Go" is another favorite of mine. When playing this game, I tell the model to strike any pose they want and hold it until they hear the shutter or see the lights go off. As soon as I shoot, they must change their pose into whatever they want, hold it and wait and so on. This is a challenge for both the model and the photographer, both of whom will have to think on their toes. Very often, this will lead to more laughter than actually good photos, but nothing creates comfort like laughter, and when that's done, you can move on to more planned shoots.

The trick with these games is to not overdo it. Play "Click 'n' Go" for a couple of minutes, then move on. Have your model "Say It!" if they are having trouble getting the right expression for the shot you want, but don't have them act out an entire play.

## Don't Touch

This is especially important, when you are working with models you don't know personally. No matter how much you want your model to pose in a certain way, you should find a way of directing her without touching. This is a matter of professionality and coming off as a serious photographer, rather than a creep. It is so much better to show your model the pose you want or offer little directions than it is to break the trust there is between you and the person you are shooting.

It is much better to offer little, short directions such as "bend you elbow a bit" or "turn you head half an inch to the left" than it is for you to put your hands on the model and guide them. Most of the time, when photographers resort to physically guiding their models instead of telling them what to do, it is because of impatience on the photographer's part, and if you find yourself getting impatient with the model, it is better to move on to a completely different pose than to risk creating an uneasy atmosphere.

### Eyes, Hands and Blemishes

I've heard photographers say they didn't like shooting people, because they move around too much. There is some truth to that, because a good model shot has to catch a certain expression or mood, and to get that the model has to look right and you have to frame it just so. To help you do this, there are a few things you can watch for, when you're looking through the viewfinder.

The eyes are extremely important. If you're shooting a picture of a housewife baking, you don't want her to have bedroom eyes, and if you're doing something that's fashion inspired, you want the eyes to shine and have a certain amount of confidence in them. The rest of the face plays into all of this as well, of course, but even if the model is smiling and the eyes are not there, it will look fake.

The position of the hands is equally important. First thing to do is to make sure you don't have any half hands in the frame. Awkward cropping like that takes away from the overall image, so keep the hands out of the shot completely, or in the shot completely. No half hands. Next, you should make sure the position of the hands looks natural. Whether the pose feels natural to the model is not important (as long as it doesn't hurt). You will also want to check that nails are clean and that there are no hang nails to gross out the designer, who will be buying your shot and viewing it at 100% resolution.

Which leads me to mention blemishes, pimples and other unfortunate things. Make-up is your friend here, to give the skin a uniform look and take away any shiny reflection on the skin, but be careful not to overdo this. Some things will have to be fixed in post processing, but remember that the better your raw material is, the less processing you will have to do. And no matter how much fun Photoshop is, you will want to cut down on the time spent on it, when you are trying to build up a large stock portfolio.

In the end, the most important thing is to get out there and do it. Don't try to remember everything in this article, or you might lock up from fear of breaking the rules. Experiment and learn from your mistakes, and come back to read this again after your first few shoots and compare your mental notes to these.

## Post-Processing for Stock Photos

Think light, vibrant and "pow". That is the result you'll want to aim for, if you are looking to process your photos for maximum salability as stock images. In the following, I will be going over some of the most useful tools for attaining this look.

This is not meant to be a Photoshop tutorial. There are plenty of those around, as well as countless very good books on the subject. Instead of teaching you how to use Photoshop, I am aiming to give you a checklist of things to do or keep an eye on.

Keep in mind that this list of tips is designed to help you create a certain type of look, in the style that most people will be thinking of, when they think of stock photography. You don't have to use all (or any) of these tips, in order to make bestseller photos, but they will give you a pointer in the right direction.

### Pre-Post Processing

The better your source material is, the less work you'll have to do in the digital darkroom. So try to pick locations, props, models and lighting that all works together. Learn the basics of photography as a craft and build on that. As wonderful as Lightroom, Photoshop and similar programs are, you'll be killing yourself slowly, if you constantly have to try and save your images with post-processing. Also, I highly recommend shooting at the lowest possible ISO at all times and in RAW format, to give you easier and better ways to work without losing quality. All of this will help you avoid noise, which is one of the most common reasons, why an image might not be approved.

Make sure your monitor is calibrated. Most monitors are way off in their colors, to the point where you probably won't believe your eyes, when you see what they look like after calibration. I remember doing mine over five or six times, thinking it had to be wrong. But it wasn't. Buy yourself a calibration tool. Even the cheap ones will give you a better result than not doing it at all.

### Always Post-Process

This is the most important piece of advice, I can give anyone wanting to start selling stock. If you ignore everything else I have written, remember this. Unprocessed digital photos generally look dull, lack contrast and may even be discolored. Even if you look at it and go: "This is the best photo, I've ever taken!" go ahead and do a little tweaking to it anyway. I promise, you won't regret it. You will at the very least be wanting to give it a little more contrast (use curves instead of the contrast slider), do color correction and clear off any blemishes or dust particles.

### Process in Batches

If you have a whole photo shoot to process, chances are that many of the images will have similar work done. If you work on them simultaneously, your results will be much more even, than if you try to do just one at a time. With RAW files, you can copy/paste the entire processing of an image to any number of shots, and then give each one little adjustments afterwards as needed. Using Lightroom, Aperture or even Adobe Bridge is essential to get a good workflow going, and especially so when working with larger series of images, so make sure you familiarize yourself with at least one of these tools.

## Clean Up Your Photos

There are the obvious no-nos, such as logos, visible phone numbers, license plates and artwork. These must all be removed - in time you will become a master at avoiding having these things in your photos to begin with, but until then, clone them out. Also, remove blemishes, skin flakes, zits, sleep from the eyes and gunk from between the teeth of your models. Every single day, I see dozens of photos where this simple procedure could have at least doubled the usefulness of the work. While we're at it, remove any distracting elements from the background too, and straighten any lines that were not meant to be crooked. Relevant tools: Clone stamp, healing brush and patch tool.

*For this shot, the background was cleaned up, the skintones evened out and booktitles removed. I also added a little pop to the colors. That's it.*

## Curves and Overlay

Contrast is the easiest way to make your images pop, but don't use the brightness/contrast slider. Instead, learn to master the curves tool and combine it with a few other tricks, such as using overlay: Copy your original image into a new layer, set the blending mode to overlay and turn the opacity down to about 20-40%, depending on how light your exposure is. You may want to apply this only on your main subject, to make that stick out even more, so use a mask to select just that area. Just don't overdo it, or you will lose detail in the darker areas and possibly generate noise. You can also use Soft Light for a similar, but less harsh result. Relevant tools: Curves in RAW processing, Curves adjustment layers, overlay and soft light layers.

## Airy Lightness

If most of your background is light and airy, focus will be more easily drawn to your actual subject. This also goes back to what you started with. If you shot an underexposed image in a dark alley, you will find it impossible to make the photo light and airy without degrading the quality beyond usefulness. Use bouncing and diffused lighting during the shoot to get rid of any hard shadows. In post processing, you can add lightness by toning parts of your image or certain colors. A gradient map of white and blue, pulled way back and on the background only, can work wonders. Relevant tools: Adjustment layers with gradient maps, color gradients, selective color and color balance.

### Add Saturation

Be careful when doing this. Too much color will make highlights lose detail and add noise to any gradients (such as blue sky). But if you do it just right, a little added saturation can really make the image pop. I highly recommend doing this as part of your RAW processing. Relevant tools: Hue/Saturation.

### Beware of Noise Reduction

Noise Ninja, NeatImage and other noise removal add-ons and programs seldom improve any images. In my experience, they remove too much detail unless used by someone who really know what they're doing. Images become plasticlike and blurry from too much noise reduction, and adding sharpening afterwards only makes it worse.

### Beware of Sharpening

Just like noise reduction makes an image blotchy and blurry, sharpening tends to make photos too hard. If your image is sold for print, the designer might want to sharpen it a bit first, but leave it to her to decide how much is needed. You can't use sharpening to save out-of-focus images either, so don't even try. Personally, I never use sharpening tools for stock. Instead, I recommend using High Pass in moderation.

### Avoid Funky Filters

Fake motion blur, fake water ripples and similar effects look, well, fake. The important thing to remember here is, that you want your end result to look believable. Some filtering is fine, but if you take it too far, it just looks cheesy. Think of sci-fi movies: If the plot and acting rocks, you'll find suspension of disbelief easier to do. If your image is good without any filtering, you can do more to it later at little or no cost, qualitywise. But if it's that good, you probably won't want to do much anyway.

### Keep Your Client in Mind

If you think your buyer can turn your photo into a good black and white on her own, you should just upload a color version, and leave the conversion to her. And on a related note, just don't make any sepia photos for stock. They are nice for artsy, retro looking prints, but you cut away 90% of potential buyers when trying to sell them sepiatoned images. Same goes for most toned images, no matter what the color, though selective toning to, say, the background of an image, can yield great results. There are exceptions, as with everything in life, but if you want to play it safe, don't go there.

Just because an image looks good, doesn't mean that it will sell well. Stock photography is first and foremost about making useful images. The concept is king and if you do too much to it afterwards, you are likely to take away from the impact of the original concept. Unless it was built around an idea that requires post-processing in the first place.

# Getting Started on iStockphoto

Microstock has become a standard expression in the media industry, but it was iStockphoto that started it all. Including, as you may know, my own journey into photography. In the following, I would like to give you an introduction to becoming a contributor at the website, that has changed my life in too many ways to mention.

In short iStockphoto serves as an agency, providing photographs, illustrations, video and more for royalty free, commercial use. In the case of photos, these are priced depending on the resolution in which they are sold, meaning that tiny versions are less expensive than huge ones. The maximum resolution available being the native resolution of the camera it was shot with. Photographers get a percentage of the sales price, starting at 20% and maxing out at twice that. These royalties increase as more photos are sold, depending on exclusivity.

When a contributing photographer has sold a minimum of 250 photos, and has an overall approval rating (I'll get to that in a sec) of at least 50%, she can apply for exclusivity. To be an exclusive photographer with iStockphoto gives you certain advantages:

- Higher royalty payouts.
- Faster image approval process.
- Access to iStock events (iStockalypses) all over the world.
- Free businesscards annually (from moo.com) w. promotional code on the back.

The only "but" is, that you can't sell or give away your photos as royalty free stock anywhere else. You can still do work for hire, such as shoot weddings or the next Coca-Cola ad, and you can still sell your work under a rights managed license. If you do become exclusive and later change your mind, you can quit with 30 days notice.

### Application process

Before you get that far, you first have to be approved as a contributing photographer. To achieve this, you are asked to familiarize yourself with the quality standards, as presented in an online manual, and then submit three samples of your work. The idea of these samples is to show that you understand the quality standards, and to show that you can actually use a camera. The best thing to do, is to upload the cleanest, crispest

and most striking photos you have, that are all different and that are all stock worthy. They should be color corrected and all that jazz, but not processed to the point where they look unreal. Don't upload three phonecam shots from last Friday's night out with the guys, no matter how much fun you were having. Show them what you can do!

Even if you fail the first time on the samples, don't sweat it. The application inspectors will tell you what you did wrong and how to fix it, and you'll get another chance. Eventually, you'll get it right and you can start submitting photos to your very own stock portfolio.

## Image Inspections

Each and every submitted photo is inspected by people like me. We have all been recruited from within the contributing member force of the site and undergone further training, to go from knowing the standards to mastering them. Inspections are the same for exclusives and non-exclusives, although they have seperate queues and the exclusive one tends to move faster. If an image does not live up to the required standards, it is rejected. Sometimes with the option to resubmit the image, if the problem is deemed fixable (resubmitted images keep their spot in the queue, so you won't have as long a wait). Your approval rating is based on, how many of your submissions that are approved versus rejected.

Don't be suprised, if you have quite a few rejected images at first. For most people, there will be aspects the need a little work, either technically, legally (no logos!) or understanding exactly what makes an image good stock, as opposed to a snapshot or even art. Every rejection comes with a note, explaining why this particular shot didn't make it, and there is even a method of appeal, if you feel that the inspectors are wrong.

After the first 50 or so submissions, you will have a much better feel for what is what, and most likely have a much higher approval rate than when you first signed up. If you submit regularly, the needed skills and knowledge of will most likely be spot on after about 6 months. By the time you are ready to apply for exclusivity, your approval rating probably won't be an issue.

## Experiences and Expectations

There is much more to iStockphoto than simply uploading and selling photos. There are forums, where you can get more help from fellow contributors, watch designers battle it out in the "Steel Cage" (they use iStock images to do judged composite/design battles, fighting for download credits) or take part in a real life iStockphoto event. There are many more aspects to explore, including opportunities for networking with clients as well as other photograhers.

I have been with iStockphoto since 2000 (even though my profile page says 2002), and I've met so many fantastic people, including my wife, through there. I have moved across the world, I have learned new techniques and seen my work in use on everything from book covers in Poland to billboards in Texas, and most importantly, I've had a hell of a ride. Has it made me rich? No, and it probably never will. For me, part of the journey has been discovering where my photographic passion lies (portraits, baby!) and by being able to play around, I have found a style of my own and still sold enough to keep me motivated along the way.

You shouldn't go into microstock photography expecting to do it full time a year from signing up. Most of us use it as a supplement to our main income, and only the most dedicated, specialized contributors can make a living off of microstock alone. Before committing to working as hard as that takes, try it out for a while and see how you like it. Shooting pro-quality stock is not easy, as you will discover when you begin setting up your first shoots using real models, studio sets, lights and all that good stuff (it is however, a lot of fun). Progress at your own pace, experiment and play along the way, and find the niche that is right for you.

It is very realistic to make your photography gear pay for itself through iStockphoto, or pay off the car, even help send your kid to college. If you go beyond that in earnings, congratulations, you've got what it takes to become a pro! I hope to see more of your stuff coming through the inspection queue soon.